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ABSTRACT

A fundamental assumption in some recently developed language teaching methodologies is that there should be a silent period at the beginning of second language instruction during which students do not speak the target language but develop and demonstrate comprehension in other ways. A number of studies and experiments have attempted to illustrate that language instruction is more effective when it begins with the silent period. However, data from natural language acquisition studies do not conclusively support the existence of a silent period in natural learning contexts, and the results of pedagogical research do not justify the general rejection of early target language output in the language classroom. An alternative that would satisfy the need of some students to communicate and the desire of others to remain silent would have an initial period of reduced output, limiting the pressure on students to communicate and limiting the types of communication used. This approach would accommodate individual differences but would not allow a prescribed progression through instructional materials. Instead, it would require teacher sensitivity and curricular flexibility. (MSE)

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Silence in the Communicative Curriculum

JOHN GIBBONS

The Silent Period Hypothesis

A fundamental assumption of certain recently developed language teaching methodologies is that there should be a "Silent Period" at the beginning of second language instruction when language learners do not speak the target language. Moreover they are assumed to be capable of comprehending, and are expected to demonstrate comprehension by means other than the use of the second language. This assumption is derived from studies of natural second language acquisition and is supported by experiments using a silent period in language instruction. The Silent Period Hypothesis is succinctly described by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982: 25–26) as follows:

> These kinds of findings permit us to suggest that communication situations in which students are permitted to remain silent or respond in their first language may be the most effective approach for the early phases of language instruction. This approach approximates what language learners of all ages have been observed to do naturally, and it appears to be more effective than forcing full two-way communication from the very beginning of L_2 acquisition.

In the initial stage of such methodologies student responses take the form of action or non-verbal communication (Asher 1977; Krashen and Terrell 1983 : 20). This stage could last only a few hours for adults, but for young children could take from one to six months (Krashen and Terrell 1983: 78).

The case for the Silent Period is presented in similar form in Gary (1975: 90–91), Postovsky (1977: 18–20) and Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982: 21–25). These writers draw on a broadly similar group of sources for child second language acquisition, adult second language acquisition and second language instruction. Evidence of these three types will be presented and assessed in turn.

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Child Second Language Acquisition

The studies most often cited as evidence that "children acquiring a second language typically exhibit a 'silent period' for one to three months or so" (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982: 23) are Huang (1970), Ervin-Tripp (1974), Hakuta (1974) and Hatch (1972). Ervin-Tripp (1974) reports that her children, aged five years and six and a half began speaking French eight and six weeks respectively after entering a French language school. She also says that some (not all) of the other children she studied said nothing for many months. Like Hatch's subject her children began with memorised routines and patterns, and these were essentially of a socially interactive type. Ervin-Tripp (1974: 115) writes: "Their earliest utterances included greetings: "au revoir", "salut", "bonjour Madame"; operational terms dealing with interaction: "regarde", "tiens", "allez-y", and claims related to the self: "moi bebe", moi sanglier". The last two expressions were used in play. Early syntax began to emerge some weeks later. Ervin-Tripp also indicate that Benjamin Chen's two year old son also initially used routines and patterns. Hakuta's (1974) study of the Japanese five year old girl, Uguisu, began three months after the latter entered kindergarten so she was already speaking English when the study began — Hakuta (1974: 20) writes "the very first visit, Uguisu yielded some 11 utterances". We therefore have no information on a silent period for Uguisu and the frequent citation of this reference is puzzling (if not misleading). She did however use little language during the first two months of the study, and much of her early output consisted similarly of routines and patterns. Huang (1970) and Hatch (1972) report that the subject, a five year old Chinese boy, said nothing for two weeks then used memorised routines and patterns for eight weeks. If we disregard Hakuta's study, Hatch and Huang's subject spoke after two weeks, and Ervin-Tripp's after six and eight weeks. The discrepancy between two weeks and six to eight weeks may be a result of individual differences in personality, or it may be explained by the fact that Hatch and Huang's subject had no speakers of their own language in the school/kindergarten environment so their need for second language interaction was more urgent than that of Ervin-Tripp's children. The initial two week silent period, comprising a limited amount of linguistic input in the school (some of it inevitably poor in quality) is open to a simple interpretation. If a child is given little help and no

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[illegible], i.e., is acquiring and not learning the second language, then it will take considerable exposure before the child can make sense of the flood of input. Rather than a period of silent comprehension this could better be classified as a period of silent *in*comprehension. If silence persists then social and psychological factors can probably provide an explanation. In particular Kohn and Stevens (1972, 1974) report that some children beginning schooling in their mother tongue are withdrawn and uncommunicative at first. How much more traumatic must it be to begin schooling when one cannot understand the school language and possibly the host culture. Philips (1972) also indicates differences in culturally influenced learning styles. A period of withdrawal for some second language children is therefore predictable, and may have little to do with psychological language acquisition processes.

The evidence for a period of silent comprehension in child second language acquisition is inconcluaive. The period may be only two to three weeks rather than the one to three months claimed by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982: 83), and initially it may be an inevitable non-comprehension hiatus rather than a period of silent comprehension. Furthermore the claims are made on the basis of studies of only four children and an aside of Ervin-Tripp's — a clearly inadequate data base. There are also no comparisons made with the withdrawal period of some native speaker children beginning schooling. If the initial silent period is purely a product of incomprehension then in language instruction it could be avoided by the use of known techniques which make input comprehensible, although there may be pedagogic arguments for a silent period.

The seemingly lengthy period when memorised holophrases (routines and patterns) are used is interesting. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982: 241) write "there may be a general similarity between adult and child use of routines and patterns as facilitator of social interaction when productive rules have not yet been acquired". There is some debate as to the role these routines and patterns play in the development of syntax. At the very least one could imagine that they provide accessible input for the acquisition of the syntactic form of the routine or pattern, and that consequently there is some facilitation of the development of syntax.

Interestingly Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982: 22) and others appear to include the initial use of routines and patterns within the

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silent period (which may explain their belief in its greater length). To regard this form of speech as silence is disconcerting, but one must take into account the strong emphasis on syntactic form in this school of language acquisition. A communicative and interactive view of second language development could see early routines and patterns as evidence of the first developmental stage of an ability to interact in the second language. It should also be remembered that the silent period hypothesis has been used as a justification for discouraging any early use of the second language for social interaction, in contravention of the natural early use of routines and patterns discussed above.

Adult Acquisition Studies

The most frequently cited source (Postovsky 1977: 20; Gary 1975: 90; Dulay, Burt and Krashen 1982: 21–22) is a paragraph from Sorensen (not Sorenson) (1967). This is accessible as Sorensen (1972) and reference will be made to this revised version. Sorensen describes the extraordinarily multi-lingual Vaupes River Indians, and makes brief mention of their language learning approach. The relevant sections read as follows (Sorensen 1972: 88–89):

> Tukano, incidentally is not an easy language to learn. It has a great many phonemes and an intricate tonal system; and apart from the tonal system, it has an intricate system of stress. This suggests the hypothesis that sheer intricacy may foster an all-or-none attitude toward learning to speak a phonologically elaborate language... The Indians do not practise speaking a language that they do not know well yet. Instead, they passively learn lists of words, forms, and phrases in it and familiarize themselves with the sound of its pronunciation. The diverse and discrete phonologies of these languages and their dialects loom very prominently in the Indians' regard. They may make an occasional preliminary attempt to speak a new language in an appropriate situation, but if it does not come easily, they will not try to force it. One of the pre-conditions of language-learning in the area is a passive familiarity with lists of words (including inflected and derived forms) in languages likely to be learned.

It is evident that the Vaupés River Indians adopt a comparatively passive approach to learning languages. The reason given

for this is the considerable phonological complexity of the relevant languages, and perhaps also an unwillingness to risk phonological errors because of the high value placed on accurate pronunciation (Sorensen's wording may be ambiguous here). There is no real evidence for a silent period, but rather for a long term strategy in which "if it does not come easily, they will not try to force it".

There is contrary evidence from another group of very successful language learners interviewed by Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern and Todesco. They write (Naiman *et al.* 1978: 10):

> In order to elicit the interviewees' opinions, which would presumably be based upon their language learning experience, the following question was asked:
>
> Some of the ways of learning a language seem to involve you as a learner more actively (for example, in some cases you are made to speak right from the start), others allows you to be more passive (for example, you just listen to the teacher or you read widely).
>
> Generally speaking, would you prefer to be relatively passive or rather active in the early stages of language learning?
>
> Of the interviewees, 82 per cent considered it best to be active right from the beginning, regardless of certain personality characteristics they might have, such as shyness, that would tend to make them follow a more passive approach.

The other piece of evidence used by Krashen (1982) is the case of a Taiwanese woman described by Varvel (1979: 490–91) who remained silent in class until the ninth week of instruction. Presumably the remainder of the class were not silent however.

Once more the evidence given for the existence of a silent period occuring naturally in adults is inconclusive, insufficient and perhaps not entirely relevant. Nevertheless the idea of a more relaxed and unforced approach to oral proficiency of the type described by Sorensen has some appeal.

Language Teaching Experiments

There have been a number of experiments which have aimed at demonstrating that language instruction is more effective if there is an initial phase in which learners are not permitted to speak the target language. Classroom experiments which attempt to compare

language teaching methodologies are notoriously difficult to defend. This is because it is extremely difficult to control all the variables which might affect language learning so that any differences in attainment can definitely be said to derive solely from the language teaching methodology. Another problem is to find a generally accepted measure of these differences in attainment, since different methodologies tend to produce differing profiles of language proficiency. There is not space here to discuss all the experiments which support an initial silent period in language teaching, but three of the most frequently cited will serve to illustrate the inherent problems.

The difficulty in finding acceptable measurement can be seen in Asher, Kusudo and de La Torre (1974), where the comparison between experimental and control groups was done by means of a test based on listening which clearly favoured the experimental group, since at the half way point in the programme they received instruction "in which class time is 70 per cent listening training through commands" (Asher *et al.* 1974: 28). Another noticeable feature was the ingenuity and flair used by the teacher with the experimental group. The teacher variable is important in my experience, but it was not controlled for, and probably cannot be.

Postovsky (1974) is also frequently cited. His findings reveal that students whose instruction included an initial silent period showed an advantage after six weeks of instruction, but demonstrated no significant difference in attainment after twelve weeks, which is evidence that a silent period in instruction produces little long term gain.

Gary (1975) performed a convincing experiment. Possible flaws were that the materials were designed for the Experimental Group then modified for the Control Group, and we are given no information about the teacher and his/her attitudes. Gary used both daily tests and two large scale tests in the 14th week of instruction, and at the end of the instruction (the 22nd week). There were no significant differences on any of the oral production tests or, surprisingly, on the ability to respond to commands. The daily test revealed an advantage for the Experimental Group on question responses, but the large scale tests did not. Also both groups were favourably disposed to their programmes. Essentially there was very little difference in attainment. Since both groups had the same teacher, the small difference might be explained by an unconscious preference of

the teacher for the experimental methodology.

It is of course easy to pick holes in other people's experiments — far more difficult to perform adequate experiments oneself. However Gary (1975: 93) makes an important point with regard to these experiments — she writes that if "students who weren't required to speak in initial stages could do *at least as well* as students who were required to speak ... then teachers would no longer have to feel compelled to spend a lot of time on oral drill".

Conclusions

The data from natural acquisition studies do not justify statements which assume a natural silent period as fact. Rather than an extended period of silent comprehension for children, an alternative explanation would be the following. First a short silent period of *in*-comprehension. Then, for some children only, a period of silent comprehension and acquisition produced by psychological withdrawal or learning style rather than language acquisition imperatives. Next a period, sometimes quite lengthy, when unanalysed routines and patterns are used. This explanation has a better fit to the available data. The evidence from adult acquisition studies is equivocal and insufficient for any clear picture to emerge, although adult acquisition may be similar to that of children.

If language acquisition studies and experimental studies do not provide firm support for an initial silent comprehension stage in language instruction, are there arguments from within language pedagogy itself to support a silent period? There is evidence after all, as, Gary (1975) has pointed out, that an initial silent period does no harm. The pedagogical arguments need to be seen in the light of the fact that "most beginning English language texts still provide for massive amounts of oral practice and pronunciation correction through a variety of drills" (Gary and Gary 1981: 1). This includes most communicative courses. Those of us who have experienced this type of initial instruction will testify to the stress it engenders. Gary and Gary (1981) argue convincingly the case against this practice, and cite studies which show that classroom anxiety is an inhibiting factor in language learning (see Clément, Gardner and Smythe, 1977; and the review in Dulay, Burt and Krashen 1982: 53). One might also point out that forcing learners (especially young children) into immediate speech against their will is very insensitive, if not inhumane.

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When reacting against an idea there is a tendency to swing to the opposite pole. In this case it has led to silence being imposed on the learner, possibly equally against the learner's will. A child arriving in a host culture may well feel effectively socially isolated by lack of language ability. For example, a teacher describing a 5 year old girl entering an Australian school writes "she has been motivated to learn English because she is the only child in the school who speaks Korean. She is determined to be understood". A deliberate rejection of this need to communicate is hard to justify. Survival language (e.g., "toilet") and some basic means for engaging in social interaction may well seem urgent to the learner. On the other hand we noted previously evidence from studies of native speaking children (Kohn and Rosman 1972, 1974) that there are individual differences in early classroom inhibition as well as culturally influenced learning styles that might lead to some (but not all) second language children wishing to remain silent when beginning schooling.

The solution that I propose to these competing pressures for and against early second language speech is that the first part of a communicative curriculum should consist of a *reduced output* stage. The term "reduced" is used in two ways. First a reduction in the pressure to speak that is placed upon learners — not *demanding* any output, and also expecting a considerably smaller quantity of output than we have in the past. Second, reduced in the sense of a reduced language, using routines at first, then slot and filler type patterns. This seems to accord well with evidence from second language acquisition studies, and since it involves fewer planning operations (Clark and Clark 1977: 223–92). particularly the difficult ones involved in generating sentences, it should be considerably less stressful. The teacher could provide the learner in a host society with formulae to meet the needs discussed above for survival language and for basic social interaction (see the examples from Ervin-Tripp 1974 given earlier). These routines and patterns may also play a facilitative role in other language development (see Hatch's 1977: 46 comments on "chunks").

To conclude, since there are considerable individual differences in inhibition when entering classroom instruction we should probably neither impose initial silence nor initial speech. Consequently we cannot expect a pre-ordained progression through set material in a given time. At this stage, as in all stages of language teaching,

rather than packaged solutions there is a need for *sensitivity* in the teacher and *flexibility* in the curriculum.

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